



Teaching English in the World: Playing with Critical Theory in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series

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Playing with Critical Theory in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series

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The release of a new Harry Potter novel sparks international celebrations. Lana A. Whited reports that *Prisoner of Azkaban* was released in the afternoon in Great Britain to prevent children from skipping school to buy it. The release of *Goblet of Fire* broke all previous publications records by selling three million copies in the first week, and Whited observes, "It is difficult to recall another occasion when the public was so enraptured by an author's work since Americans stood on the wharves of Boston Harbor awaiting the latest installment of Charles Dickens' *The Olde Curiosity Shop*" (2). The receptions of *Order of the Phoenix* and *Half-Blood Prince* have generated equal enthusiasm, and Pottermania will likely continue until the series ends. Indeed, the books' popularity makes them hard to ignore, and English teachers should embrace the Potter phenomenon as an opportunity to

teach students techniques of close reading and concepts from critical theory. Students already enjoy these texts as a form of play, and teachers should help students engage with them in a spirit both playful and intellectual.

Should We Teach Harry Potter?

The debate over labeling the Potter books as literature generates lots of heat but little light and misses the point that students' interest in the texts and their willingness to read and reread them can be harnessed for important educational goals. In most cases, students (and teachers) first come to these texts voluntarily rather than as a part of an educational curriculum, and it is therefore

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tempting to consider them "guilty pleasures"—a chance for indulgence and a waste of instructional time that would be better spent on serious scholarly pursuits. Likewise, some teachers resist bringing popular texts into the classroom because they see it as a space espe-

cially reserved for the classics. Our goal is not to argue that the classics of the English literary tradition should be supplanted by the likes of Potter but to show that the same critical-reading skills can be applied to both high and popular culture. For example, Tisha Beaton's *English Journal* article illustrates how the Potter books can be used in a curriculum that integrates math, science, and language arts. Teachers can use popular culture texts such as the Potter books to walk the line between play and work with their students, inviting them to engage with cultural constructions of social class, gender, sexuality, and race.

Fan to Critic

Using popular culture texts that capture students' interests, we can move students from reading as fans to reading as critics if we are prepared to help them think deeply about how issues such as class, gender, sexual identity, and race operate in fiction. As myriad Potter Web sites and fan fiction sites illustrate, readers of these books expend considerable energy debating plots, speculating about what will happen in the final installment, and revising the stories by writing their own versions. For example, on MuggleNet (<http://mugglenet.com>), fans have

posted over 2,600 stories extending the romantic pairings of the books and creating new pairings. Also, in the discussion groups, moderators post questions such as "Was Dumbledore really fooled by Snape?" that encourage debates reliant on textual evidence to support pro and con positions.

Harnessing such interest and energy in the service of teaching close-reading skills and critical thinking requires that we pose engaging questions that draw students into the issues motivating critical theory. To that end, we offer examples of how the Potter texts can engage students in studying constructions of cultural values in relation to consumerism and social class, gender inequity, homophobia and heteronormativity, and racial tokenism.

How Do Class Issues Play in Harry Potter?

The myth of the American Dream invites students to believe that social class raises no insurmountable barriers to the realization of financial success, yet class structures stratify our ostensibly egalitarian society. Sadly, as Jonathan Kozol demonstrates, perhaps nowhere are these inequalities more apparent than in our schools, and thus the classroom can provide a powerful locus for probing issues of social class and how it affects lives.

Rowling invites readers to attend to class tensions by contrasting the aristocratic Malfoys' snobbery with the Weasleys' strained finances, by juxtaposing Hermione's crusade to liberate house elves (who work essentially as slaves) with others' dismissal of the issue, and by comparing Harry

as orphaned, undernourished, and owning few possessions to his corpulent cousin Dudley. Dudley serves as a poster child of child consumerism when he complains about not receiving enough presents and when he breaks his new toys, which pile up in the second bedroom that stores them. In contrast, Harry's consumerism goes almost unnoticed. Suman Gupta calls Harry "the consumer's dream" in that "he can buy and buy and take and take without having to work or fret about financial resources" (135) and in that desirable objects that presumably have great value (e.g., his top-of-the-line broomstick, his invisibility cloak, and the Marauder's Map) simply appear at his disposal to aid his quests. In the end, Harry's economic privilege and cool consumerism are made nearly invisible.

As teachers, we can help students move to deeper understandings of how wealth and class operate in the Potter books—as well as in society—by engaging them with questions that consider why some characters are rich and

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some poor. One way to begin such an analysis is to give students a list of the main teenage characters (e.g., Harry, Ron, Hermione, Dudley, Draco, Neville, and Tom Riddle) and ask them to rank them from richest to poorest and to cite evidence from the text to support their distinctions. A set of follow-up questions could ask students to consider such interesting

issues as who is controlled by money and who makes good use of money, or who pays the tuition of Hogwarts students, and why do students have no chores?

How Does Gender Play in Harry Potter?

If students were asked if the Potter books are sexist, most would likely respond with a resounding "No!" and cite the women who hold positions of power, the lack of overtly sexist acts, and the importance of female characters such as Hermione. The books make nods to gender equality, as if the wizarding world were a post-feminist nirvana, yet many clues alert readers that female agency is nonetheless muted. Indeed, the marginalization of female characters is perhaps the easiest identity issue to problematize in the series. Ask students to consider who controls Hogwarts, the Ministry of Magic, the Order of the Phoenix, and the adventures of Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Males nearly always take charge. Another useful question is to consider how men and women are portrayed in the three primary families—the Weasleys, Dursleys, and Malfoys. Again, men take roles as breadwinners who work in the world at large while women serve as caretakers in the domestic sphere.

As we argue elsewhere, female characters are also portrayed using traditional standards of beauty that are not applied to men, and women are portrayed as irrelevant or immoral when taking action outside of male authority (see Pugh and Wallace). The Potter books challenge gender stereotypes in some instances and rein-

force them in others, and helping students to see this tension illuminates the ways in which gender delimits the actions of various characters—both male and female.

How Does Sexual Orientation Play in Harry Potter?

Homophobia is mostly absent in the Potter series: no instances of gay bashing appear in the texts, and the only antigay comment is made by Dudley, who is such an unappealing character that the comment cannot be read as endorsing bias against gays (*Harry Potter and the Order* 15). However, if the Potter books are not antigay, they are clearly heteronormative in that they endorse heterosexuality as the only viable sexual identity. While Rowling allows for the token presence of people of color in the wizarding world, she erases the presence of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered/transsexual people.

That Rowling singles out LGBT people for erasure is particularly problematic given that the series continually celebrates non-normativity. The opening line of *Sorcerer's Stone*—"Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much" (1)—derides normativity as a cultural value by linking it so closely to Harry's antagonistic relatives; the series nonetheless links constructions of normativity between the worlds of wizards and muggles.

Inviting students to examine representations of sexual identity in the Potter texts can begin by posing rather simple questions: How many couples are in the books, and why are there no same-

sex pairs? Why are there special enchantments to keep boys out of the Gryffindor girls' dormitory, but yet no concern arises about the boys sleeping with boys and girls with girls? Who are the parents of Hogwarts students, and why do none of the students have two mommies or two daddies?

From these questions about erasure, students could address more

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complicated questions about queer figuration in the texts, such as the parallels between queer coming-out stories and Harry's coming out of his cupboard beneath the Dursleys' stairs and how werewolves might be seen as problematic figures for gay men (see Pugh and Wallace). In some ways, Rowling invites readers to see wizardry as a metaphor of queerness, but these readings are nonetheless contained by the texts' investment in the normativity they seek to undermine.

How Does Race Play in Harry Potter?

If one thinks of racism in the usual ways, racism does not mar the pages of Potter, as neither racial slurs nor incidents of racial intimidation occur in the books. In examining how race functions in the Harry Potter series, it is nonetheless important to help students consider not only what is depicted in the texts but also what is absent.

Rowling's books depict a world of fantastic diversity in many ways—werewolves, giants, unicorns, wizards, and other magical beings all live together in the same world. This diversity of magical creatures masks the uniformity of the wizarding world, which appears to be virtually a post-racial society, one in which race no longer defines a person or inhibits interpersonal relationships among people of different races. At the same time, the texts' main actors are all white. The Potter series depicts interracial couples—such as Harry and Cho Chang or Fred Weasley and Angelina Johnson—in a fairly offhand way, suggesting that interracial dating bears no stigma. Still, the stories of these pairings are told from the perspective of the white characters.

Indeed, one way to help students understand the overwhelming whiteness of these books is to ask them why all of the main characters are white. Similarly, we might help students understand the concept of racial tokenism by asking them to consider why few characters are people of color and prompting them to think about the extent to which these characters affect the plots or culture of Hogwarts.

Another fruitful avenue for inviting students to consider how race functions in the Potter books is to explore the prejudice and discrimination faced by part-humans and other magical creatures. Give students a list of magical creatures in the books and ask them to sort them into categories: which are treated as subhuman enemies that can be destroyed (boggarts), which are treated as animals (hippogriffs), which can verbally interact with humans (talking spiders) or mate

with humans (giants), and which are presented as equal to humans (centaurs)? Another way to explore the relationship between species and race in the books is to ask students to decide whether they would join Hermione's S.P.E.W. (Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare) and to cite their reasons. This is likely a fruitful avenue, because, as Farah Mendlesohn points out, the arguments posed in the books against house-elf liberation come "straight from the American antebellum South" (180) and because freed elves are portrayed either as "happy dark[ies]" (Dobby) or as "miserable when freed" (Winky; 179).

Ultimately, the tension between representation and tokenism, of presence and absence, as well as the problematic parallels between race issues and species issues, muddies the efforts of the series to depict a convincingly postracial society. Helping students to understand how these tensions operate in the Potter books can aid them in identifying such problems in other contexts as well.

Work and Play

The constructions of social class, gender, sexual orientation, and

race in the Potter series appear so naturalized that they go unnoticed by many readers. Yet the texts instruct readers to see the wizarding world in a manner that normalizes consumerism, male dominance, LGBT absence, and racial tokenism. Exposing the ideological weight of the texts in service of pedagogical goals enlightens the ways in which critical thinking and critical theory help readers to comprehend how texts—and society—function. In commenting on ideological constructions in Potter, we might sound like sour liberal intellectuals—deflating the texts of their pleasure as make-believe by popping them with the pin of leftist angst. But what we seek to model for students is reading as a double-edged practice, both textual and metatextual, where work and play are intertwined.

The textual pleasures of the Potter series appear in sharp focus to many readers without the assistance of teachers, and teachers should help students find pleasure and deeper meanings on the metatextual level. These worthy pedagogical goals entail work, but this work can be accomplished with the understanding that work, when done well, becomes play.

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